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FRANÇOIS MITTERRAND AND THE PALESTINIANS: 1956–95

JEAN-PIERRE FILIU

François Mitterrand, the longest-serving French president in history, never ceased to be a passionate advocate of Israel, in contrast to his Gaullist predecessors. But he was also the most committed to Palestinian statehood, and among the earliest to insist on the PLO's full engagement in the peace process, often at considerable cost to his ties with Israel. By the time Mitterrand left office in 1995, France's Middle Eastern role had greatly declined, with the United States having assumed full control of the peace process; during the 1980s, however, its contributions had been significant. This article examines Mitterrand's fourteen-year presidency and the paradoxes of his Middle East policy.

FRANÇOIS MITTERRAND, A SOCIALIST, was elected president of the French republic on 10 May 1981 after two decades of conservative rule during which the country's Middle East policy was seen as leaning toward the Arab states. This had not always been the case. France had been Israel's staunchest ally in the 1950s and one of its main military suppliers up to the June 1967 war, when President Charles de Gaulle strongly and publicly opposed the Israeli offensive and demanded full withdrawal from all the territories occupied during the conflict. De Gaulle's successors at the Elysée—Georges Pompidou (1969–1974) and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974–1981)—continued policies that only exacerbated the rift with Israel. Meanwhile, the main government opposition, the French Socialist party, continued to enjoy the close relations with Israel that had been cemented even before the establishment of the Jewish state.

Mitterrand, besides having led the Socialist party for the decade before his election, had been known in his own right as one of Israel's strongest supporters on the French political scene. A founder of *Alliance France-Israël*, he had consistently criticized France's estrangement from the Jewish state. Given these well-known facts, Mitterrand, once elected, was widely expected to take France's Middle East policy in a sharply new direction. Yet even while his commitment to Israel never wavered, within a year he had gone farther than any of his predecessors on the Palestine issue, recognizing for the first time the Palestinians' right to a state. During his two terms in office (1981–1995), he twice proposed—in 1982 and 1990—UN resolutions aimed at engaging the

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PLO and Israel in a new political process. He insisted from an early date that the PLO be a full participant in all negotiations and was one of the earliest advocates (in 1980) of Israeli-Palestinian "mutual recognition." Twice—in the summer of 1982 and in autumn 1983—he sent French navy and commando forces to rescue PLO fighters threatened with annihilation in Lebanon, and it was at his insistence that the PLO was able to leave Beirut with their dignity intact, heads high and flags flying. Indeed, his unquestionably pro-Israeli bias, far from neutralizing his drive to win acceptance for the PLO and the concept of Palestinian statehood, led him to push for these goals even more strongly. Long before his friends in the Israeli Labor party, he was convinced that Palestinian statehood and the preservation of the PLO were essential not just for the sake of the Palestinians, but the long-term interests of Israel.

THE OPPOSITION YEARS

The solidarity between French socialists and the Zionist movement had deep roots: In the 1940s, French premier Leon Blum played a crucial role in mobilizing international support for the founding of the Jewish state, and French socialist activists organized networks of illegal immigration to Palestine in 1945–1948. The rise of pan-Arab nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt in the 1950s and the hostility he generated in both Israel and France only solidified the links between the French Socialist party (*Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière*—SFIO) and the Israeli Labor party, which governed Israel for the first three decades of its existence. French socialists were convinced that the nationalist guerrilla war in Algeria launched by the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*) in November 1954 would be doomed without Egyptian military and diplomatic support. When Guy Mollet, secretary general of the SFIO, became prime minister in February 1956, he tightened military cooperation with Israel; Shimon Peres handled these sensitive issues in Paris on behalf of David Ben-Gurion. The result was the Israeli-French-British tripartite invasion of Egypt in October–November 1956, secretly plotted by the three parties in Sèvres near Paris. In accordance with the plan, Israel invaded the Sinai on 29 October. When Egypt, as expected, rejected the ultimatum issued by Paris and London to "neutralize" the Suez Canal, the French government immediately requested approval for an expedition from the two chambers of parliament.

Mitterrand, who was justice minister at the time, was charged by Mollet to present the case for war to the Senate while Mollet himself addressed the National Assembly. Though Mitterrand was miffed at having been excluded from the secret plot (which involved only Mollet and his defense and foreign ministers), he was personally committed to the expedition and strongly defended its necessity, placing full blame on Nasser as "a dictator who spared neither blood nor threat."¹ The motion to go to war carried by a wide margin in both chambers (550 to 182 in the Assembly; 308 to 19 in the Senate), reflecting the broad consensus in favor of fighting Arab nationalism shoulder-to-shoulder

with Israel. The operation, during which the entire Sinai up to the Suez canal was occupied, was a military success but a diplomatic disaster, with the United States and the Soviet Union imposing a cease-fire and forcing the aggressors to withdraw.

Though a minister in the Mollet government, Mitterrand was not then a member of the Socialist party, but head of a center-left party, the UDSR (*Union Démocratique et Socialiste de la Résistance*). Thus, whereas the French socialist party had dealings only with Israeli Labor, Mitterrand was free to receive not only Shimon Peres and others of his party, but also Menachem Begin, head of Israel's Herut, precursor to the Likud. This latitude also enabled him in November 1956 to help found the *Alliance France-Israël* (dominated on the Israeli side by the right-wing opposition), which advocated a full-fledged treaty between the two countries.

The demise of the Fourth Republic sent Mitterrand back to the opposition, where he violently criticized what he called General de Gaulle's "permanent coup"² in founding the Fifth Republic. He was nominated as the left-wing challenger to the head of state during the December 1965 presidential elections, and when the SFIO was reconstituted in 1971 as the *Parti Socialiste* (Socialist party), he prevailed over the SFIO old guard and became head of the new party. In that capacity, he used the special relationship between the French and Israeli socialists to distance himself from his pro-Arab communist allies. One of the first foreign countries he visited as French socialist leader was Israel,³ in 1972.

It was during that trip that he was directly exposed for the first time to the

Mitterrand's visit to a Gaza refugee camp in 1972 made a lasting impression on him, enabling him to appreciate the nationalist dimension of the Palestine issue consistently denied by Israel and its supporters.

plight of the Palestinian refugees; a visit to a camp in Gaza left a lasting impression on him. Thus, even though he was not impressed by PLO leader Yasir Arafat when he met him informally in Egypt (at Anwar Sadat's behest) two years later,⁴ he was nonetheless able to appreciate the nationalist dimension of the Palestinian issue consistently denied by Israel and many of its supporters. On his next visit to Israel several years later, he spoke of "two different national realities, based on the same principle, the right to self-determination."⁵

Indeed, Mitterrand recognized earlier than most the need for a Palestinian state. While his Israeli Labor friends were pushing hard for the "Jordanian option," Mitterrand emphasized the dangers of relying on Jordan to negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians. In December 1976, he even urged Israel to "recognize the right of these Palestinians to organize themselves within the framework of a new state."⁶ And although Mitterrand had challenged the French interpretation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 242⁷ and welcomed the 1978 Israeli-Egyptian Camp David agreements, he saw no contradiction between these positions and his principled support for a Palestinian state. In January 1978, at a time when France under Giscard d'Estaing was openly critical of a process seen as undermining the comprehensive approach it favored, Mitterrand visited President Jimmy Carter at the U.S. embassy in Paris

to publicize his endorsement of the U.S.-sponsored Israeli-Egyptian peace process. Mitterrand was also critical of the landmark June 1980 Venice Declaration, adopted at France's urging by the European Community, which called for a just solution to the Palestine problem within the framework of a comprehensive peace settlement. Yet at the same time, he gave a press conference calling for "mutual recognition"⁸ between Israel and the Palestinians. The Venice Declaration had divided the French Left, with the Communist party welcoming what amounted to the conservative government's direct challenge to the United States, and the Socialist party remaining far closer to Israel. It was against this background that François Mitterrand was elected president in May 1981.

The debates surrounding the Israeli-Arab conflict during the 1981 presidential campaign, which pitted incumbent Giscard d'Estaing against Mitterrand as the most serious among several challengers, were marked by an intensity that blurred traditional dividing lines. When Mitterrand on live television challenged Giscard d'Estaing about his stance on Camp David, the French president retorted that, contrary to his socialist opponent, he was "too responsible" to support the idea of a Palestinian state.⁹ Pro-Israel activists called for a "punishment vote" against France's allegedly pro-Arab right wing, while pro-PLO militants, who came mainly from a "New Left" background, backed the socialist candidate.

FRANCE'S FIRST STATE VISIT TO ISRAEL

One of Mitterrand's campaign promises had been to pay a state visit to Israel—an official honor not yet accorded to the Jewish state—during his first year in office, and upon his election he made clear his intention to fulfill this promise. Moreover, immediately upon assuming office he banned what amounted to state incentives for companies observing the Arab boycott against Israel, and within the European Community blocked moves to implement the Venice Declaration, an implicit challenge to the prevailing logic of Camp David. These positive gestures, however, did not prevent Begin, who had become Israel's prime minister in 1977, from moving ahead with a series of provocations: Israel bombed the French-built Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq in June 1981 (killing a French engineer), launched deadly raids against PLO bases in southern Lebanon and Beirut a month later, and annexed the Syrian Golan Heights in December. Though Mitterrand publicly expressed regret that Begin had "altered his potential of trust,"¹⁰ he nonetheless held to his promise of a state visit, warning his advisers not "to utter a word before my departure. . . . A snake is hiding under every stone."¹¹

Mitterrand's forty-eight-hour state visit to Israel in March 1982 was celebrated with solemnity and pride by both countries. The French delegation included four government ministers (Economy, Foreign Affairs, Culture, and Youth), the film director Claude Lanzmann (already at work on his landmark documentary *Shoah*), and several French Jewish personalities. The high point of the visit was Mitterrand's speech to the Israeli Knesset on 4 March. He wrote it himself,

working and reworking sensitive phrases up to the last minute. Besides celebrating the ties between the two nations, he praised the Camp David agreements and endorsed in cautious and nuanced language Israel's interpretation of UNSC resolution 242, which emphasizes withdrawal from only some of the territories occupied in 1967.¹² But Mitterrand also talked about the fate of the Palestinian people:

I have no more right than anyone else to decide who represents these people and who does not. How, for example, can the PLO, which speaks on behalf of the fighters, hope to sit at the negotiating table as long as it denies what is vital to Israel, which is the right to exist and the means of its security? . . . Dialogue means that each party can claim its full rights, which could, for the Palestinians as well as for the others, eventually mean a state.¹³

Despite his praise of Camp David and endorsement of Israel's vision of 242, the French president's words about the Palestinians had broken two taboos: mention of the PLO (even to insist that it recognize Israel's right to exist—a major concession) and the Palestinian state. Begin reacted violently. Not only did he brand the PLO charter as “an Arab version of *Mein Kampf*,”¹⁴ he viciously attacked the French foreign minister, Claude Cheysson, for his invitation to receive the elected mayors of Gaza, Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Nablus at the French consulate general in Jerusalem.¹⁵ The luncheon—hosted by Begin, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, and Military Intelligence Chief Yehoshua Saguy—was dominated by discussion of “Palestinian terrorist” threats in Lebanon. Mitterrand ignored the storm and refused to dilute his stance during the press conference.¹⁶ Despite the controversy, he returned to France proud of having fulfilled his promise and convinced that his trip had “spared Lebanon a painful ordeal.”¹⁷

In fact, Lebanon's “painful ordeal” was only postponed, and in the meantime France continued to pay for its special relationship with that country with yet more incidents: the murder of its ambassador in Beirut on 4 September 1981, a few days after he organized a meeting between Arafat and Cheysson, and a car bombing of the French embassy in Lebanon on 24 May 1982 that killed eleven. Two weeks later, on 6 June, 100,000 Israeli soldiers crossed into Lebanon, launching the fifth Israeli-Arab war.

THE SIEGE OF BEIRUT

Mitterrand was hosting the G7 Summit in Versailles at the time of the invasion. Like U.S. president Ronald Reagan, he initially seemed to believe Israel's explanation that “Operation Peace in Galilee” would be limited, as Begin put it, to “cleansing” a 40-kilometer-deep pocket into Lebanese territory of the PLO military presence.¹⁸ He even coined the concept of Lebanon's “three

occupations" by Israel, Syria, and the Palestinians, suggesting equivalency among the three.¹⁹ He thus felt betrayed when the Israeli army penetrated deep into the Chouf Mountains, seized the city of Sidon after a bloody battle, and as of mid-June besieged West Beirut. With Arafat trapped in the city and his PLO fighters and their Lebanese allies left to resist Israel on their own after Syria agreed to a cease-fire, the political impact of the siege was tremendous both in the West and the Arab world. In France, images of Israeli bombings shocked the public and galvanized the leftist parties and unions against the war.

Mitterrand was incensed by Israel's deception, complaining to his advisers that "Begin lied to me."²⁰ He could have turned a blind eye to Israel's restoration of "security" on its northern border, but he was outraged by the possibility of bloodshed in Beirut and its impact on Lebanon's future and the stability of the Middle East. He thus proposed the "neutralization of West Beirut under the monitoring of UN observers,"²¹ presented to the UN Security Council as a French draft resolution. But the Reagan administration, apparently won over to Israel's plan to liquidate the PLO and roll back Syria, vetoed the draft on 26 June.

Despite this humiliation, Mitterrand, convinced that the PLO had to be saved as a negotiating partner for the success of any eventual political settlement, kept up the diplomatic momentum within the ten-member European Community. At the same time he maintained a close dialogue with Egyptian president Husni Mubarak, likewise worried about the regional fallout of the siege. Both were convinced that the crisis could only be solved politically, by offering the PLO a diplomatic trade-off for disarming the bulk of its fighters. Paris and Cairo drafted a proposal for a UNSC resolution on 2 July that would expand the scope of UNSC resolution 242 (which mentioned only the Palestinian "refugees") by specifying the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. The very same day, Nahum Goldmann, Philip Klutznick, and Pierre Mendès France met in Paris to urge Israel and the PLO to negotiate. This call was welcomed by Arafat, still trapped in besieged Beirut. But the French-Egyptian attempt to link the current crisis to a broader peace process was derailed by Israel's rejection, U.S. opposition, and Arab fears that a delay in solving the immediate crisis could ignite the whole region.

In *Under Siege: PLO Decisionmaking during the 1982 War*, Rashid Khalidi describes the close French-Palestinian diplomatic cooperation that characterized the period. "Neither the PLO nor the French had any illusions as to the tenacity of American opposition to the [French-Egyptian] resolution," he writes. "However, they both were determined to push ahead with it in the hope that American determination would be worn down by the PLO's resistance. . . . Arab passivity was often replaced by something worse: active complicity with the U.S. in putting pressure on the PLO and undermining the French role."²² French diplomats felt that the United States was waging a vicious campaign against the PLO's image and resolve, and to counteract the effort they kept open channels with the PLO in an impressive display of mutual trust.²³

Even though the French-Egyptian option appeared blocked, Mitterrand adamantly insisted on preserving Lebanon's sovereignty and the PLO's dignity

in any settlement to end the siege. When Reagan wrote to him on 9 July suggesting that they bypass the United Nations and send a joint intervention force to Beirut immediately,²⁴ the French president responded by demanding an official request from the Lebanese government, explicit PLO agreement, and formal UN endorsement.²⁵ Two days later, the PLO “fully endorsed the line being followed by the Mitterrand government, particularly its emphasis on UN sponsorship for the international disengagement force.”²⁶ Receiving Arab foreign ministers (including Faruq al-Qaddumi, head of PLO international relations) on 15 July, Mitterrand insisted that the PLO “must be a basic party in all future negotiations.”²⁷ According to Khalidi, the French “doggedly” pursued efforts to persuade Washington to offer the PLO “a political quid pro quo in exchange for its withdrawal from Beirut,”²⁸ going so far as to warn Arafat “against the ‘trap’ of a U.S.-sponsored evacuation agreement.”²⁹

Despite repeated all-out assaults on West Beirut (in which several French diplomatic and cultural symbols were bombed), Israel was unable to break the military stalemate or cut through the fierce resistance of the PLO and its allies. It was only a matter of time, however, and Reagan’s special envoy Philip Habib brokered a plan to end the siege by withdrawing the PLO forces from Beirut without ever dealing directly with the PLO. France, by contrast, sought and on 6 August received Lebanese and PLO approval for the intervention. The same day, the French Socialist and Communist parties, along with all the major leftist unions, strongly supported Mitterrand’s position and called for the establishment of a “full-fledged sovereign Palestinian state.”³⁰

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France’s actions during the 1982 Lebanon crisis so embittered relations with Israel that when a terrorist attack in Paris’s old Jewish quarter killed six, Begin put the blame on Mitterrand himself.

left six dead and twenty-five injured, Israel immediately accused “the anti-Israeli climate prevailing in France since the beginning of the war in Lebanon.”³¹ Begin put the blame on Mitterrand himself, who was confronted by a hostile crowd when visiting the families of the victims. Arafat expressed his “absolute condemnation of this beastly act,”³² for which Mitterrand thanked him personally. Despite the extreme tension between France and Israel, Mitterrand declared on 17 August that “nobody, nothing, not even Mr. Begin’s statements, will turn me into an enemy of Israel.”³³ Meanwhile, the so-

called “Habib plan” was finalized on 18 August, and the next day the Lebanese government formally requested France, the United States, and Italy to form a multinational force. French troops, the first to be deployed, landed in Beirut on 21 August.

In the ten days that followed, some 14,700 fighters were evacuated from Beirut, mostly by ship to Algeria, Yemen, Sudan, and Tunisia.³⁴ It was the French who controlled the harbor through which the fighters were evacuated; with the French adamantly refusing to turn over a list of the departing men, the Israelis filmed the entire operation from the *Electricité du Liban* building in East Beirut.

Meanwhile the Americans were careful in avoiding any formal contact with the PLO, and the Italians were deployed throughout West Beirut. At France's insistence, and despite Israeli harassment, the fedayeen were allowed to leave with their personal weapons, uniforms, and flags, marching to their ships under French protection while thousands of Beirut residents, many weeping, turned out to bid them farewell. The French ambassador himself escorted Arafat and the last fedayeen contingent to their ship on 30 August under the protection of the French Legionnaires. Despite considerable friction between French and Israeli soldiers during the process, which lasted over a week, the operation was a technical success.

Meanwhile, Bashir Gemayel, Israel's local ally, was elected president of Lebanon on 23 August, and on 1 September Reagan announced his Middle East peace plan proposing "self-government" for the West Bank and Gaza in "association" with Jordan, without mentioning either the PLO or a Palestinian state. By mid-September, the multinational force had left Beirut, and Mitterrand could believe that Lebanese sovereignty and Palestinian dignity had been preserved against all odds. But the assassination of Bashir Gemayel and the massacres in the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatila shattered such hopes.

DEFENDING THE PLO IN LEBANON

Almost immediately after news of the Sabra and Shatila massacres broke, Mitterrand sent some 2,000 soldiers back to Beirut as part of a new multinational force—again comprising Italian and U.S. contingents—whose mission was to protect the Palestinian survivors in the refugee camps and to assist the stabilization of Lebanon under its new president, Amin Gemayel, Bashir's brother, who had been elected on 21 September 1982. The mission to help restore law and order in West Beirut became far more difficult after the signing on 17 May 1983 of the Israeli-Lebanese peace agreement—brokered by the United States without any consultation with any other interested parties—brought to a head violent opposition to Gemayel's regime, spearheaded by Syria through its Lebanese allies (the mainly Druze Progressive Socialist party and the Shi'i Amal).

Meanwhile, to the dismay of Egypt, Jordan, and the Israeli Labor party, the "Reagan plan" seemed doomed by Begin's fierce refusal to contemplate any withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. Although France maintained its political dialogue with the PLO and engineered a fruitful antiterrorism cooperation with Abu Iyad's intelligence apparatus,³⁵ the diplomatic horizon remained bleak. The PLO was further weakened by an internal dissidence (*insbiqaq*) fuelled by Syria in the spring of 1983. The pro-Damascus "rebels" progressively took over the Palestinian camps in regions of Lebanon under Syrian army control. By the end of summer 1983, the elimination of PLO loyalists was nearly complete and Arafat slipped into Tripoli, the main city in northern Lebanon, to galvanize 4,000 armed supporters in their last stronghold. There, the PLO chief and his fighters were once again besieged, this time by an Arab army

and Palestinian rebels who challenged Arafat's legitimacy. When Mitterrand on 26 October 1983 tried to weigh in by praising Arafat as "an intelligent and brave leader,"³⁶ the pro-Syrian rebels vehemently denounced his "interference in Palestinian internal affairs."³⁷ The assaults on Tripoli became more deadly throughout November, and Mitterrand demanded an end to the "manhunt."³⁸

Tripoli was now completely surrounded, on land by the Syrian army backed by Libyan units and pro-Damascus Palestinian guerrillas, and at sea by the Israeli navy, eager to crush the Palestinian leader who had eluded capture in 1982. The dangers to the Palestinian fighters were no less than they had been during the Beirut blockade, and Mitterrand again stepped in to stave off disaster. With French encouragement, the PLO began negotiating through the International Committee of the Red Cross the exchange of six captured Israeli soldiers it had been holding in Tripoli against thousands of Palestinians and Lebanese prisoners held by Israel. The fighting in Tripoli provided the impetus for all the parties to agree to this deal, guaranteed by French logistical and military support.

On 24 November, the PLO handed the six Israeli prisoners over to French naval officers near Tripoli while Israel released 4,683 Arab detainees from prisons in Israel and Israeli-occupied south Lebanon. More than 1,100 prisoners, mostly Palestinians, traveled from Tel Aviv to Algiers on three Air France jets. The remaining detainees, half Palestinian and half Lebanese, were bused to cities of south Lebanon, and France released the six captured Israelis to the Israeli navy. Mitterrand received public thanks from Arafat and Yitzhak Shamir, who had succeeded Begin as Israel's prime minister.³⁹ The prisoner exchange was an important moment for the PLO, demonstrating its ability to deal with Israel in the interests of the Palestinian people.

After the prisoner exchange, everything seemed in place for the evacuation of the remaining PLO fighters in Lebanon. Arafat requested UN intervention, and Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar endorsed the operation. But the situation was so volatile that, even under the UN flag, France was the only country that volunteered for the mission. A Palestinian attack on a bus in Jerusalem on 4 December 1983 increased Mitterrand's worries about the possibility of clashing with the Israeli navy, which was still bombing Tripoli. Two weeks later, 4,326 Palestinians, including Arafat and his fighters and numerous women and children, left Tripoli for their new exile on Greek merchant ships under French naval escort. The operation was completed in a single day. While transiting through the Suez Canal, the PLO leader disembarked to meet with President Mubarak, thereby ending the Palestinian-Egyptian rift that began during the Camp David process and reaffirming the mainstream PLO's peaceful stand against the rejectionists.

Meanwhile, despite their very different roles, French soldiers as well as their American counterparts were caught in the crossfire between warring Lebanese factions. On 23 October 1983, massive suicide bombings against French and U.S. barracks killed 58 French soldiers and 241 Americans, mostly Marines. Following the 6 February 1984 takeover of West Beirut by pro-Syrian

militias, the U.S. contingent was “redeployed offshore,”⁴⁰ leaving the French units on their own. They left at the end of March, after the May peace agreement with Israel had been repealed and the country was at least superficially reconciled.

After more than two years of intensive involvement in the Middle East, Mitterrand appeared temporarily to put the Palestine issue on the back burner, avoiding the high-profile engagement of the post-1982 period. Still, he never missed an opportunity to reaffirm his commitment to the PLO’s integrity and the security of the Palestinian people. In May 1985, for example, France was one of the very few states to condemn the Shi’i militias’ assaults against Lebanon’s Palestinian camps,⁴¹ and in October of that same year Mitterrand condemned Israel’s bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis, an act tacitly supported by the Reagan administration as an “antiterrorist” raid.⁴²

LAYING THE GROUND FOR A PLO ROLE IN PEACE TALKS

The popular uprising of the West Bank and Gaza, which broke out in December 1987, took the PLO leaders by surprise. By returning the Israeli-occupied territories to the center of the Palestinian issue, it forced them to focus its sights on a political settlement. This long-awaited development spurred Mitterrand in turn to involve France once again at the highest diplomatic level. Indeed, already a year before the intifada erupted, with Israel fiercely refusing any withdrawal from the territories and both Labor and Likud refusing any contact with the PLO, Mitterrand had warned against the “temptation of discouragement.”⁴³ During the intifada, he was completely outraged by the brutality of Israeli repression, stating that “this daily killing is becoming really unbearable. . . . Israel must realize one has to go forward, either live in a permanent state of war, with excesses and dramas, or negotiate.”⁴⁴

Reelected to a second seven-year term in May 1988, Mitterrand urged Arafat to recognize Israel unequivocally and condemn terrorism. PLO deputy Abu Iyad endorsed the two-state solution in the French press,⁴⁵ but in Mitterrand’s eyes his formulation, based on the 1947 UN partition plan of Palestine, was still too cumbersome. In September 1988, Arafat, addressing the European parliament in Strasbourg at the invitation of that body’s socialist group, formally accepted all UN resolutions concerning Palestine, including 242. On 15 November, the PLO parliament, the Palestine National Council (PNC), convened in Algiers, proclaimed the “State of Palestine” and, in a 253–46 vote, renounced “any armed action outside the occupied territories and against innocents.”⁴⁶ Forty states officially recognized Palestine, including Egypt, while Arafat and Mubarak urged their Arab peers to formulate a common peace plan.

Mitterrand made a solemn declaration a few days later: “France takes note of the Algiers proclamation and endorses the right of the Palestinian people to live in a territory constituted as an independent state.”⁴⁷ While the Israeli Peace Now movement pressed Shamir’s government to talk with the PLO, the outgoing Reagan administration supported Israeli rejectionism by denying Arafat,

who had been invited to address the UN General Assembly, a visa. Mitterrand sharply criticized this "interference in the internal affairs of an international organization,"⁴⁸ but failed to convince the European summit to challenge the U.S. decision. The UN General Assembly was transferred to Geneva, where, on 15 December, Arafat praised Mitterrand and reiterated his endorsement of the key UN resolutions. Both Reagan's administration and George H. W. Bush's transitional advisory team judged the speech sufficiently satisfactory to trigger the long-awaited U.S.-PLO dialogue, which was launched soon after between U.S. ambassador to Tunisia Robert Pelletreau and PLO executive committee member Yasir 'Abid Rabbuh.

Mitterrand opened the new year in 1989 with a symbolic gesture toward Palestinian statehood. Although French diplomatic tradition prohibited the formal recognition of a "virtual" state, Mitterrand praised the "rebirth of the Palestinian nation"⁴⁹ and upgraded the PLO office to the status of a "General Delegation," with the full range of diplomatic immunities. There was only one other precedent for such symbolic recognition: Quebec, based on France's special relationship with Canada's Francophone province.

Commenting that "the people of Israel and Palestine will have to coexist one day as neighbors,"⁵⁰ the French president tried to engage Prime Minister Shamir in a more open approach to the Palestine issue, sending his foreign minister to Israel and later receiving Shamir himself in Paris. Instead, the Israeli premier proposed "general elections" in the West Bank and Gaza for a delegation empowered to negotiate "autonomy" for the territories, thereby demonstrating his government's continuing rejection of a PLO role or the possibility of a Palestinian state. Meanwhile, Syria and the Arab rejectionists were already condemning Arafat's "betrayal" of the "armed struggle" and challenging his leadership of the PLO. Mitterrand was becoming worried that the only reward for Arafat's brave step might be the mid-level dialogue with the United States in Tunis. It was in this context that he invited Arafat to visit him in Paris on 2-3 May 1989.

Arafat's visit generated tremendous excitement in the French capital, which seemed to live those two days more or less on "Palestinian time." Heavy security measures around the Crillon, the elegant hotel on Place de la Concorde where Arafat and his delegation were staying, snarled traffic in the city center. French personalities and activists flocked to greet the "Palestinian president," while his opponents vented their hostility toward the "arch-terrorist" in street demonstrations. Media coverage was intense. Nearly half the French public believed that Arafat's visit would hasten a peaceful solution.⁵¹

The meeting between Mitterrand and Arafat at the Elysée palace lasted an hour and a half. The two men, who had not met since their lukewarm encounter in Cairo fifteen years earlier, obviously enjoyed themselves this time around. Arafat repeatedly thanked his "friend" for having saved him twice. Mitterrand praised the Palestinian leader for choosing the path of negotiation with Israel, but noted the contradiction between the PLO's recent decisions and its twenty-five-year-old charter. Was not the charter "obsolete" (*caduc*), he suggested? The

Elysée statement at the end of the meeting reported the president's observation that the charter "was contrary, on important points, to the political program endorsed by PLO in Algiers on 15 November 1988, and [that he] felt that this situation should be clarified."⁵²

Arafat got the message. That same night, after breaking the Ramadan fast with hundreds of French VIPs, he declared on French television: "I was elected [chairman of the PLO] on the basis of a two-state political program. Regarding the [PLO] charter, there is a French expression for that. *C'est caduc*."⁵³ The French and international press jumped on this term. The French daily *Libération* wrote that "Arafat's *caduc* echoed around the world."⁵⁴ Apart from his official meetings with the prime minister, the foreign minister, and other members of government, Arafat received a wide range of political and union leaders at the Crillon. He also insisted on laying wreaths on the graves of the "Palestinian martyrs" buried at Père-Lachaise cemetery, including the first two PLO representatives in Paris, assassinated in 1973 and 1978.

Mitterrand instructed the Quai d'Orsay to brief Israel on his talks with Arafat. But Shamir refused to hear any information about "the visit to France by the leader of an organization of murderers."⁵⁵ His foreign minister, Moshe Arens, went so far as to compare Arafat's supporters in France to Nazi enthusiasts in the 1930s.⁵⁶ Israeli doves, led by the MK Avraham Burg, countered by declaring that "the comparison between the Palestinians and the Nazis is not only political nonsense, but an insult to the memory of six million dead [in the Holocaust]."⁵⁷ Ezer Weizman, Haim Ramon, and Uzi Baram urged the government to take into consideration Arafat's statement on the "obsolescence" of PLO charter. Yossi Sarid argued that "we should praise and encourage President Mitterrand for his fruitful efforts. His meeting with Arafat led to an additional . . . softening of the PLO position."⁵⁸

Although the extent of his impact on Israeli politics is debatable, Mitterrand was satisfied with his consistent and principled approach to the Palestinian issue. In his eyes, his reception of Arafat in Paris in May 1989 echoed his own visit to Israel seven years earlier, and in fact he used the same wording as on that earlier occasion to address the most sensitive issues. He believed that he had helped George H. W. Bush's push for peace by encouraging Arafat to pronounce the PLO charter "obsolete." He was confident that he could contribute to further breakthroughs, and he believed that France would have a role in whatever settlement was negotiated. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait doomed this prospect.

FROM KUWAIT TO OSLO

In the autumn of 1989, when the intifada was still going strong, Mitterrand threw French diplomatic support behind the "Baker plan" to initiate an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue in Cairo aimed at stopping the violence and beginning negotiations. Shamir, however, insisted that the PLO be explicitly excluded from the process. Shocked and disappointed, Mitterrand sharply criticized Israel

before the European Parliament. Alluding to the ongoing intifada, he declared that "Nothing should allow this continuous repression that transforms men into prey. . . . [W]hat is going on in the West Bank must stop."⁵⁹ In April 1990, he seized the opportunity of a meeting between Arafat and former U.S. president Carter in Paris to welcome the PLO leader to the Elysée for the second time, while Carter publicly asserted that Arafat "had done his utmost to promote the peace process during the last months."⁶⁰ President Bush took a different view. The following month, when a rejectionist PLO faction supported by Iraq launched an attack on a beach near Tel Aviv, the White House "suspended" its one-and-a-half-year-old dialogue with the PLO. Mitterrand deplored the fact that Washington for the sake of the peace process did not show any of the indulgence it habitually showed Israel, whose excessive use of force was frequently decried.

Iraq's August 1990 invasion and annexation of Kuwait consolidated the exclusion of the PLO when its leadership endorsed Saddam Hussein's "offer" to link Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait to Israeli evacuation of the occupied territories. Mitterrand, who had fully subscribed to the United Nations' call for the unconditional restoration of Kuwait sovereignty, was appalled by the Palestinian alignment on Baghdad (resisted only by Abu Iyad among the PLO leadership), which he saw as political suicide. When Saddam Hussein seized thousands of Westerners, including hundreds of French citizens, as "human shields," Mitterrand quickly rejected Arafat's proposal to broker a separate deal for the French hostages. And when the PLO leader insisted on presenting his "peace plan" in Paris, Mitterrand refused to receive him, sending Prime Minister Michel Rocard to listen to the pro-Iraqi proposal in his stead.

By mid-September 1990, the French president had dispatched 4,200 French soldiers and 30 fighter jets to join the U.S.-led coalition in the Iraqi desert, but he still hoped for a negotiated settlement that would avoid war and save the PLO from itself. Mitterrand therefore proposed in a 24 September address to the UN General Assembly a multi-phased solution to the crisis: (a) an Iraqi commitment to evacuate Kuwait and release all foreign hostages; followed by (b) a guarantee by the international community of the implementation of military withdrawal and the full restoration of Kuwait sovereignty; which would make possible (c) a "momentum of good neighborliness in a climate of peace and security for all," with specific reference to Lebanon, the Palestinians, and Israel.⁶¹ Not surprisingly, the plan went nowhere.

UNSC resolution 678, passed in November 1990, set the deadline of 15 January 1991 for Iraq to evacuate Kuwait or face the legitimate use of force. On 14 January, the eve of the expiration, France made a last-ditch effort to avert the war by presenting a six-point compromise plan to the UN Security Council that included reformulations of key points of its September proposal: point six was a more explicit call for action to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestine problem (specifically named this time), notably "through the convening at an appropriate time of a properly structured international conference."⁶²

That same day, Abu Iyad was assassinated in Tunis by a Palestinian double agent working for the Iraqi-based and supported ultra-rejectionist Abu Nidal group. France discreetly lamented the loss not only of its main Palestinian partner in the field of counterterrorism, but also of the last buffer against all-out pro-Iraqi sentiments in the PLO leadership. The coalition air raids—including by France—against Iraqi targets commenced the following day. Six weeks later, a massive ground offensive ousted the last Iraqi troops from Kuwait, and Iraq accepted all U.S. conditions for a cease-fire.

Immediately after the end of hostilities, Mitterrand, convinced that any lasting peace process would best be guided with strong UN involvement, proposed a meeting of the Security Council at the level of heads of states, reasserted the Palestinian right to statehood, and warned against an unbalanced approach to the Middle East crisis. Several days later, George H. W. Bush addressed Congress about the future challenges of the postwar era, including the need for a comprehensive peace settlement based on the land for peace principle; no mention was made of the points most dear to Mitterrand, including UN involvement and Palestinian statehood. Thus, when the two presidents met in Martinique on 14 March, Mitterrand tried to convince his American counterpart of his vision.

Just as he had attempted to expand the scope of UNSC resolution 242 during the 1982 siege of Beirut to include the Palestinian right to self determination (i.e., eventual statehood) as a means of engaging the PLO in a substantive political process, so eight years later he emphasized (following the PLO's example at the 1988 Algiers PNC meeting) UNGA resolution 181 as the legal basis for a Palestinian state. On both occasions, his attempt to persuade the United States of his diplomatic logic failed. Similarly, his bid for the need of UN involvement in the

peace process failed: despite the "price of blood" France had paid alongside U.S. military forces both in Lebanon and in Iraq, Mitterrand's voice did not move Washington on either issue. Nonetheless, at the joint press conference that followed, Mitterrand elaborated on his vision of Palestinian statehood, emphasizing that in insisting on a "state," he was being "faithful to the UN resolutions because, when Israel was created, it was decided there would be two states. We have since forgotten half of the proposal."⁶³ The issue of PLO participation in the peace process was broached at another meeting between the two presidents near Paris on 14 July (Bastille Day) of 1991. After bluntly stating that "Arafat made the wrong choice," Bush asked the French president, "Do you think he is politically dead?" To which Mitterrand responded, "I do not think so. One way or another, he will kick back."⁶⁴

Notwithstanding, Washington was determined to exclude the PLO from the peace conference being planned. This being the case, France argued strongly for the formula of a joint "Jordanian-Palestinian" delegation that would at least give the Palestinian representatives the PLO's blessing. After months of tough negotiation, especially between Israel and the United States, the peace

After Labor returned to power following the 1992 Knesset elections, Mitterrand warned his Israeli friends against the delusion of an alternative to the PLO.

conference opened in Madrid on 30 October 1991 under the cosponsorship of presidents Bush and Gorbachev, with the Dutch foreign minister representing Europe in an observer capacity. Mitterrand, disappointed to be left out, described Madrid as "Camp David, plus the Russians."⁶⁵ Nonetheless, he praised American diplomacy for this landmark achievement.

After Israel's Labor party returned to power as a result of the 1992 Knesset elections, Mitterrand tried to make the case for eventual Palestinian statehood and PLO participation in peace negotiations with his Israeli colleagues. While his old friend Shimon Peres, once again foreign minister, called for an "extremely important role" for Europe in the Middle East, Mitterrand met with resistance on the other issues. In November, he embarked on his second state visit to Israel. In Jerusalem, he emphasized that "the UN recognized, at the same time, the prospect of a state for the Israelis and a state for the Palestinians. One of these states emerged vigorously and bravely. . . . The other one got sidetracked (*en rade*), although its right is the same."⁶⁶ Mitterrand warned his Israeli friends against the delusion of an alternative to the PLO. After Jerusalem, he went on to Amman. The cartoonist for *Le Monde*, who was among the French journalists covering the trip, asked the president to suggest a caption for the cartoon he had drawn showing Rabin, Arafat, and King Hussein together in a restaurant, with Mitterrand as the waiter. The French president sardonically proposed: "Although you have not yet ordered the appetizers, I hope you will go as far as the dessert."⁶⁷

The Israeli-Palestinian talks held in Washington, DC, without direct PLO participation after Madrid never really took off. A secret and direct channel with the PLO was therefore opened in Norway in January 1993, and a framework agreement for Palestinian self-government was signed in Oslo on 20 August. Arafat sent an envoy to Paris to inform the French authorities, while Peres and his Norwegian counterpart flew to the United States to brief the Clinton administration. But the mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO had yet to be formalized, and it was in Paris that agreement on this last remaining item was hammered out and the document initialed on 9 September 1993. A few hours later, Mitterrand appeared on French television to conduct a live dialogue with Arafat in Tunis and Peres in Jerusalem. Peres stated that "during these last days, negotiations were driven by Paris. This is where we struck our deals with the PLO."⁶⁸ In a veiled retort to the Israeli and U.S. critics of his allegedly pro-PLO bias, Mitterrand commented that "one always seems wrong at a certain time, when one eventually turns out to be right."⁶⁹ On 10 September, the letters of mutual recognition by Rabin and Arafat were made public, and all the documents were signed three days later at the White House in the presence of President Bill Clinton.

Before leaving the presidency in May 1995, Mitterrand received Arafat in Paris two more times: in October 1993, as representative of the Gaza-Jericho entity, and in July 1994, as president of the recently established Palestinian Authority. They never saw each other again. By coincidence, Arafat landed in Paris for an international conference just hours after the former president died in the early morning of 8 January 1996. He went straight from the airport to

Mitterrand's apartment next to the Champ-de-Mars to pay his respects. In an emotional gesture, the Palestinian leader kissed the forehead of the dead man and recited the *Fatiha* (the opening lines of the Qur'an) over his body. Three days later, at Mitterrand's state funeral at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, the Palestinian president sat only meters away from Israeli prime minister Peres. The fact that the two men mourned him equally was perhaps the most touching tribute to Mitterrand's diplomacy in the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

Looking at Mitterrand's fourteen years of presidential involvement in the Middle East, some observations are in order. He was elected president in 1981, at a time when France consistently took the lead in shaping the Middle East agenda of the ten-member European Community. By the time he left office in 1995, his country's role in the region, as elsewhere, was much diminished, dwarfed by the overwhelming power of the United States.

France's dramatic eclipse was most glaringly obvious at the 1991 peace conference, when it was deprived of any role despite its considerable expertise and privileged relations with both sides, painstakingly cultivated by Mitterrand throughout his years in office, and its repeated demonstrations of loyalty to the United States. Indeed, in sharp contrast to his predecessors, Mitterrand had never challenged U.S. power, and in fact had always sought the closest cooperation with Washington in the Middle East. An early and warm supporter of the Camp David agreements opposed by the French government at the time, he was primarily responsible for suspending implementation of the European Community's Venice Declaration and for thwarting any European initiative that risked undermining U.S. goals in the region, and placed his forces in the line of fire alongside U.S. troops in Lebanon and Iraq. Though disappointed that this military exposure did not win him the leverage he had hoped would let him contribute to forging a lasting Israeli-Arab peace, he never disputed America's leading role in the region.

Mitterrand's action in the Middle East was the most intense during the first three years of his presidency, when his *Union de la gauche* enjoyed unequalled political backing and when his Palestinian exposure was strongly supported by leftist parties and unions. It was during that period that he set the course for his entire tenure in office.

Though his militant feelings of friendship for Israel never flagged, his relations with the Jewish state passed through many storms. While making unprecedented gestures to the Jewish state, he never shrank from strongly espousing positions that would inevitably incur its wrath, particularly during the years of Likud dominance. Nor did he ever give in to community pressures on his diplomacy: his words to a delegation from the *Conseil représentatif des institutions juives de France* (CRIF) protesting his invitation to Arafat to visit France admirably express both his style and his principled stance: "I am Gallican toward the Pope, let me be so toward Israel."⁷⁰

Mitterrand considered it his duty as Israel's loyal friend to do whatever he could to prevent the Jewish state from committing fatal errors, such as conquering West Beirut or liquidating the PLO leadership. This intimate but demanding friendship with Israel implied a commitment to a lasting peace, which in his view required addressing the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, ultimately through an independent Palestinian state. Similarly, his repeated protection of the PLO was without doubt motivated by his conviction that it must be preserved as a credible partner for the future political negotiations he knew would be necessary in the long-term interests of Israel.

But Mitterrand also went out of his way to take into full consideration the legitimacy of the Palestinian struggle. He declared many times that the PLO fighters deserved dignity, and he sent French troops to Lebanon not only to protect the PLO's physical integrity, but also its honor. In the fall of 1967, de Gaulle had already warned that Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza could only generate "resistance," and that this resistance would be stigmatized as "terrorism."⁷¹ Even though Mitterrand would probably not acknowledge it, he had become very "Gaullist" in this regard.

NOTES

1. Debates of the Conseil de la République, *Journal Officiel*, 30 October 1956.

2. Mitterrand began denouncing de Gaulle's "coup" against the institutions of the Fourth republic immediately after the general came to power in 1958. His book *Le Coup d'Etat permanent* was published in 1964 (Paris: Plon).

3. Chile under Salvador Allende, a rallying figure for the Left, was the first foreign country he visited; Israel was the second.

4. *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), Cairo, 1 February 1974.

5. AFP, Jerusalem, 30 October 1976.

6. AFP, Paris, 14 December 1976.

7. The English-language version of UNSC resolution 242 of November 1967 calls for Israel's "withdrawal from occupied territories," while the wording of the French, which has equal legal value (English and French both being official UN languages), is "*retrait des territoires occupés*," which France traditionally translated as "withdrawal from *the* occupied territories." As early as 1973, Mitterrand disputed the French official interpretation (*L'Unité*, 11 October 1973).

8. François Mitterrand, press conference, Paris, 23 June 1980.

9. *Le Monde*, 7 May 1981.

10. *Washington Post*, 18 June 1981.

11. Pierre Favier and Michel Martin-Roland, *La Décennie Mitterrand 1: Les Ruptures* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 297.

12. Israel, sticking to the U.S.-backed interpretation of UNSC resolution 242 (see note 7), claimed it had fulfilled it by withdrawing its forces from the Sinai.

13. François Mitterrand, speech before the Knesset, 4 March 1982.

14. *Le Matin*, 6 March 1982.

15. *Ha'Aretz*, 5 March 1982.

16. While the Israeli public in general seemed to welcome the visit as symbolic of the post-Gaullist reconciliation with France, the Arab media were very critical of the ambiguousness of Mitterrand's speech, which never mentioned the recently annexed Golan.

17. Hubert Védrine, *Les Mondes de François Mitterrand* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), p. 312.

18. Menachem Begin, letter to François Mitterrand, 6 June 1982.

19. François Mitterrand, press conference, Paris, 9 June 1982.

20. Védrine, *Les Mondes*, p. 313.

21. François Mitterrand, statement, Paris, 24 June 1982.

22. Rashid Khalidi, *Under Siege: PLO Decisionmaking during the 1982 War* (New York: Columbia University Press,

1986), pp. 138–39. See also pp. 115–127, 135–147.

23. Khalidi, *Under Siege*, p. 140.

24. Ronald Reagan, letter to François Mitterrand, 9 July 1982.

25. François Mitterrand, letter to Ronald Reagan, 10 July 1982.

26. Khalidi, *Under Siege*, pp. 141–42.

27. Khalidi, *Under Siege*, p. 146.

28. Khalidi, *Under Siege*, p. 144–45.

29. Khalidi, *Under Siege*, p. 147.

30. Joint statement signed by the Socialist party, the Communist party, the Confédération française démocratique du travail, and the Confédération générale du travail, among others, Paris, 7 August 1982.

31. AFP, Jerusalem, 9 August 1982.

32. *Revue d'études palestiniennes* (REP) 5 (Fall 1982), p. 213.

33. *Le Monde*, 19 August 1982.

34. About three-quarters of the fighters were PLO commandos, and the rest were Syrian armed personnel who traveled overland to Damascus.

35. Favier and Martin-Roland, *La Décennie Mitterrand*, pp. 307–8.

36. François Mitterrand, interview with *La Presse*, Tunis, 28 October 1983.

37. REP 11 (Spring 1984), p. 147.

38. François Mitterrand, interview on French television, 16 November 1983.

39. AFP, Jerusalem and Tripoli, 24 November 1983.

40. AFP, Point Mugu, 8 February 1984.

41. Roland Dumas, statement before the French National Assembly, 29 May 1985.

42. AFP, Paris, 1 October 1985.

43. Presidency of the Republic, Paris, 10 December 1986.

44. François Mitterrand, interview with Irish television, 24 February 1988.

45. *Journal du Dimanche*, 14 August 1988.

46. REP 30 (Winter 1989), pp. 3–7.

47. *Libération*, 23 November 1988.

48. François Mitterrand on France Inter, 30 November 1988.

49. François Mitterrand, statement, Paris, 5 January 1989.

50. REP 32 (Summer 1989), pp. 138–39.

51. *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 2 May 1989.

52. Presidency of the Republic, Paris, 2 May 1989.

53. Yasir Arafat on TF1, Paris, 2 May 1989.

54. *Libération*, 4 May 1989.

55. *Yedi'ot Abaronot*, 4 May 1989.

56. REP 33 (Fall 1989), p. 115.

57. *Ha'Aretz*, 3 May 1989.

58. Knesset debates, Jerusalem, 4 May 1989.

59. François Mitterrand at the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 25 October 1989.

60. AFP, Paris, 4 April 1990.

61. François Mitterrand's speech at the UN General Assembly, New York, 24 September 1990, translated as Document A4 in *JPS* 78. A fourth stage concerns a mutually agreed reduction of armaments in the region.

62. Reproduced from *News from France*, a publication of the French Embassy in Washington, DC, as Document A5 in *JPS* 179.

63. François Mitterrand and George Bush, joint press conference, Les-Trois-Îlets, 14 March 1991.

64. Védrine, *Les Mondes*, p. 546.

65. François Mitterrand and King Hussein, joint press conference, Amman, 28 November 1992.

66. François Mitterrand, press conference, Jerusalem, November 26, 1992.

67. François Mitterrand and King Hussein, joint press conference, Amman, 28 November 1992.

68. Shimon Peres on France 2, 9 September 1993.

69. François Mitterrand on France 2, 9 September 1993.

70. Mitterrand to the CRIF delegation at the Elysée, 11 May 1989, quoted in Pierre Péan, *Dernières volontés, derniers combats, dernières souffrances* (Paris: Plon, 2002), p. 86. Gallicanism is a French political tradition whereby the state demands its Catholic citizenry to place their loyalty to France above any other political bond, including to the Holy See.

71. Charles de Gaulle, press conference, Paris, Palais de l'Elysée, 27 November 1967. "The Israeli occupation of the territories it captured cannot continue without oppression, repression, expulsions, nor without the emergence over time of a resistance it will then label as terrorism."